

# Check the reliability factor

■ Your decision on which PC is the best buy should depend largely on how each brand performs.

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A lot of people have a daunting assignment as summer winds down: buying a computer for school.

They'll be confronted with scads of choices involving configurations, processors, peripherals and prices. One source of confusion is the multitude of manufacturers, ranging from stalwarts such as IBM and Apple, to market leaders including Compaq and Dell, to lesser-known brands.

That's why one of the most critical steps in sifting through the choices is to know which manufacturers stand out. Even major computer magazines such as *PC Magazine* (Ziff-Davis, [www.zdnet.com/pcmag](http://www.zdnet.com/pcmag)) and *PC World* (IDG, [www.pcworld.com](http://www.pcworld.com)) don't command an airplane-hangar-size lab that can test thousands of computers from every maker. But those magazines do conduct extensive mail surveys of their readers to find out how well the computers stand up and which companies stand by their systems.

It's helpful to consult the latest surveys from both the publishers to get a well-rounded sense of what's out there. Of course, just because a manufacturer gets a good rating on a survey doesn't guarantee you'll get a perfect new PC. Nor does a low score guarantee that you'll be stuck with a dud.

But the reason there are so many manufacturers — including folks whose production lines are in their garages — is that the components of the basic PC are readily available. Many of the makers get their parts from the same places. So quality is often decided by how thoroughly they test what they've built before they ship it out and how much they've invested in support staff to help you if anything goes wrong.

Support is one of the most expensive parts of the PC-making business, and it's just about the hardest thing to do well when so much of

## How different brands stack up



Here's a quick summary of the reader surveys in *PC Magazine* and *PC World*. All names listed with an asterisk (\*) also scored above average for consumers' likelihood to buy that brand again. They're listed alphabetically within each category.

### PC Magazine

#### Home PCs

**A:** Dell\*, IBM  
**B:** Apple, Micron\*, Quantex  
**C:** Gateway\*, Hewlett-Packard, NEC, Sony, Toshiba, ZEOS, locally built  
**D:** AST  
**E:** Acer, Compaq, Packard Bell

#### Office PCs

**A:** Dell\*, Hewlett-Packard, IBM  
**B:** Gateway\*, Micron\*  
**C:** Apple, Compaq, Digital, NEC, Toshiba, locally built  
**D:** Acer, Packard Bell  
**E:** AST

#### Laptops

**A:** IBM\*, Sony\*  
**B:** Compaq, Dell\*, Gateway\*, Micron, Toshiba  
**C:** Acer, Apple, Digital, Fujitsu, Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi, NEC  
**D:** Texas Instruments, WinBook  
**E:** AST

### PC World

#### Home PCs

**Outstanding:** none  
**Good:** CyberMax\*, Dell\*, IBM, Micron\*, Quantex\*, Sony  
**Fair:** Compaq, Gateway, Hewlett-Packard, NEC  
**Poor:** AST, Packard Bell  
**Unacceptable:** Acer

#### Office PCs

**Outstanding:** none  
**Good:** Dell\*, Hewlett-Packard, Micron, NEC  
**Fair:** Acer, AST, Compaq, Gateway, IBM  
**Poor:** Packard Bell

#### Laptops

**Outstanding:** none  
**Good:** Dell\*, Gateway, Micron, Toshiba  
**Fair:** Acer, Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi, IBM, NEC, WinBook  
**Poor:** AST, Fujitsu

Staff graphic

the business is battling at the bottom end of the price spectrum. There's very little profit in a sub-\$1,000 computer to be invested in quality engineering and support. So companies that can sell a lot of systems and do a good job of reliability and service are doing something right.

The results sometimes tell you the things you felt you already knew. Here's a shocker: Dell — which has taken over as the leading PC seller

and romps consistently in customer surveys and technical evaluations — comes out with great scores in the magazine evaluations. IBM, Hewlett-Packard and Micron also score consistently near the top of the pack.

But sometimes the scores reveal subtler patterns. Quantex is a growing company that doesn't run splashy television ads, but it scores very well in the analyses from both publishers.

On the other hand, Packard Bell emerged as a pioneer in the low-budget systems and surged to No. 1 in PC sales a few years ago. But its scores for service and reliability were poor. Not surprisingly, its market share has dropped dramatically, and the company's scores remain poor.

AST and Acer are manufacturers that have shown promise and grabbed market share, but lagging scores in service and reliability hint that they are going to have trouble growing larger.

While home shoppers might be enticed by the bargain prices at discount stores or by fancy showcase displays, corporate computer buyers pay strict attention to reliability scores.

In their latest surveys, *PC Magazine* (July 1999) and *PC World* (November 1998) did separate studies of office PCs, home PCs and portables, since a given manufacturer will use different parts and offer different assembly lines for those categories. The results of the two publishers don't agree perfectly, but they line up consistently enough to give a pretty clear indication of how reliable a manufacturer is.

They differ in some ways. *PC Magazine* included Apple in its check. And for the first time this year, *PC Magazine's* survey included "locally built" systems, a category lumping together all the small manufacturers that serve local markets. Of course, lumping that disparate group together is somewhat crude, but those relatively no-name makers command a sizable part of the market and are too small to be judged individually.

Interestingly, they scored above average for home and office PCs in all categories except for a key one: the sheer number of units requiring repair in the past 12 months. But they got higher-than-average scores for satisfaction and service and likelihood that someone would buy from them again.

You might want to focus on the likelihood-to-buy-again score more than any other in these surveys. If you buy a brand that has lots of happy customers who would gladly buy it again, you'll probably be happy, too.

The magazines thoroughly explain how the scores were derived and give detailed findings on how each company scored. □